

ADMINISTRATION OF SACRAMENTS IN COMBAT

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- I. This paper is, firstly, a fragment of history.

Historians know that the final proving grounds for arms, equipment and training methods is the field of battle. Historians are like weavers, fashioning a nation's garment from bits of stuff that survive the buffeting of the years. Fields are battlefields only for a day. Soon they become turnip fields again. But the harvest of honor or dishonor, the harvest of one day's battle, will thrill or torment a nation's spirit until time is no more. Here, then, is a swathe of fabric for the historian's loom. I saw it all take form.

2. This paper, secondly, can serve as a practical guide to the Catholic Chaplain, new to the Army, in the conduct of field services and ceremonials. These professional readers will recognize the incidents narrated as extremes of sacramental ministrations, all within the limits of the faculties granted by the Code and the Plagella of the Military Ordinariate; but, none the less, extremes. It is likely that a parish priest, during an entire lifetime of peacetime ministry, would not, even once, employ these extreme faculties which were familiar daily routines to me for ten months.

3. This is a clinical report on the administration of Sacraments on the Korean battlefield. The incidents narrated here typify the accommodation of the ancient ritual of the Catholic Church to American soldiers in trenches, bunkers, and foxholes. The odor of incense associated with the usual ministration of these rites was replaced by the odor of cordite. Rainbow hued Baptistries gave way to bunkers lighted by candles or gas lanterns, or muddy ditches lighted by star shells.

4. General S.L.A. Marshall, in his book, "Pork Chop Hill", presents a serious history of the Korean War. His authorities are the men who fought the battles. General Marshall lets them tell the story of their part, no matter how small, in the patrol or in the battle. Assessment of patriotism, training, endurance and courage is a valid clinical summation in "Pork Chop Hill", rather than a deduced philosophical conclusion. I will pattern my paper after General Marshall's reportorial procedure. Names, dates, and places, however, are incidental to my presentation.

5. The incidents narrated here follow no chronology. Rather, they are grouped under the Sacraments they exemplify. The Sacraments are listed in their traditional order.

BAPTISM

6. "Any person in the wayfaring state who is not already baptized is a subject capable of Baptism". (Code, Canon 745)

I used this Canon about forty times. I kept candidates under instruction for approximately three months before baptizing them, except in one case. This candidate's instruction required only one minute.

7. My normal duty station during the October, 1952 battle for Triangle Hill was the aid station to the West of the Kum-hwa crossroads. Litter bearers brought all casualties down through the "Bowling Alley", the only access route to the Eastern sector of MLR. On the third morning of the battle, the flow of casualties eased, and finally stopped. The sounds of battle hadn't abated any. The MSC officer quickly checked off his litter teams, found that they were all up in the battle lines. He quickly organized new teams. Some of the walking wounded volunteered to go, and were accepted. As soon as we rounded the corner into the "Bowling Alley", we found litter teams dead and dying. They had been caught in a barrage that covered every inch of the access road. I put my stole around my neck so that I could be identified more readily. A dying engineer yelled: "Chaplain", and started towards me. I thought he was stuck in the waist deep mud; but, I saw when I reached him that his legs had been amputated. "Do something for me, Chaplain. Do something for me!" I grabbed him, yelled for a medic, and began to get a compress on the gushing wounds. "Never mind, never mind!" He tore my hands away from the compress, held them in his own, and cried impatiently: "I'm dying. Do

something for me. Keep me from Hell!" So I gave him the one minute instruction:

"Have you been baptized?"

"No, No," Just do something for me!"

"I am doing it. You're going to face God, so don't be afraid."

"OK?"

"OK, Chaplain."

I knew he believed in God, in the after life, in reward and punishment from his first question.

"Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God?"

"What?"

"Remember Christmas? The Child in the manger?"

"Yes, Yes, the Son of God. Sweet little Jesus, boy."

"Well, I'm a Catholic Chaplain. I'm going to baptize you.

Just be sorry for all the sins of your life. And die in peace."

"I am sorry. And I'm not afraid." He had submitted to the medic, who was adjusting the compress. He died as I was pouring the water out of my canteen onto his forehead.

(Ref. Jone "Moral Theology" Par. 118, ESSENTIAL BELIEF FOR  
BAPTISM)

#### THE EUCHARIST

##### MASS

8. The wind in the valley behind Charley Company's trenches called for some counter-wind rubrics. I put one man on the Gospel corner, and another on the Epistle corner to hold the altar cloths and cards in position. Sometimes, when the wind

was more bothersome, I'd put a man in the center rear of the altar to hold the pages of the missal, when my both hands were extended or executing a required gesture. These anchor men developed a liturgical routine so reverential and self-effacing, that after a while I forgot their presence. All I'd be aware of would be a strong finger or hand that unobtrusively steadied the rocking cradle of their Lord. Even the gentlest breeze dictated foresight of this nature. The Paten, too, acquired a safeguarding function. I used it to weigh down the Host, unless I held the Host in my hand.

9. Canon Law provides for the interruption of the Mass in a variety of emergencies, depending upon the nature of the emergency, the part of the Mass that has been reached, and a whole series of events. Interruption of the Mass is a serious matter. In the front lines, emergencies rode on every mortar shell in the vicinity. I decided to finish every Mass without interruption, no matter what happened. I warned my assistant and my congregations about my decision. Knowing that they might stay with me, I told them to bug out when the first round came in. They did so a few times. Once during the Gospel, a shell whistled over, to explode just beyond where the last seat would be in a church. As the white smoke came in over my head, almost obscuring the words in the missal, I said a quick act of contrition. The smoke was from a white phosphorous shell, a marking round for the Chinese gunners. They'd fire into the smoke, not just a one round follow-up, either. Now we'd get a saturating fire of

at least twenty rounds right into the smoke. I turned around to say, "Dominus Vobiscum", and saw that I had lost my congregation. Out of the tail of my eye, I noticed helmeted heads peering out of nearby trenches towards the altar. A salvo of small mortar plopped in front and in back of the altar, throwing mud on the corporal. I went on with the Mass. As I bent over to say the "Suscipe Sancta Trinitas", the altar seemed to be moving. Thinking that it was collapsing, I put my hand out flat to steady it. It kept moving, because Benziger and another man were moving it steadily, ever so slowly, evenly, towards the trenches. If I didn't move with them, I'd surely break my bet with myself about interrupting the Mass. I didn't miss a beat, but kept up the prayers and the action of the Mass as we moved along. Now another man was alongside me, guiding my elbow, so that I wouldn't stumble. They set the altar down in the trench just as I came to the Sanctus; and, sure enough, the bell rang on time. No one was hurt. The Chinese lifted the mortar barrage at the Consecration. There were shell holes at the original altar site.

#### THE EUCHARIST

10. My tabernacle was my Mass kit or my jacket pocket. The entrenched Regiment had extensive territorial parochial boundaries. Often I would be called from Mass and Communion visitation on the Eastern sector to some outpost on the Western sector, where the men were preparing for an evening patrol. Later that same night my phone, Buccaneer White 19, would bring a request for



Viaticum. I had to carry the Blessed Sacrament with me. The only general exception to the Korean wartime faculties for the stipulated one Mass per ordinary weekday was the Mass said to provide Viaticum. Cardinal Spellman, in November, 1952, reminded his chaplains that the Mass of Viaticum could never become a daily affair, even on the battlefield.

11. My field ciborium could hold over a hundred Hosts. A Korean tailor made the burse, with a corporal for the lining, and a piece of field pants for the cover. I would unbutton the burse and open the lid of the ciborium with my left hand. This one-handed rubric was necessary because there was seldom any place available on which to rest the ciborium. The one-handed rubric helped at night too. Frequently I would reach the last of my Communion calls at the barricades as they assembled for a stealthy patrol into no-man's land to snatch a prisoner, clear a mine field, or incite a fire-fight. I could scarcely see their blackened faces. I would come down the face of a man with the small finger of my left hand until I located his tongue. Only then did I have a resting place for the white host.

#### PENANCE

12. Penance, more than the other Sacraments, acquired a special battlefield shading. The atmosphere of the quiet, darkened church, where a man could gather his thoughts in unhurried solitude; and, where, in whispered anonymity, he could confess his sins, was no more. But I had long lines of penitents whenever I strung the purple stole around my neck. The GI made his

own atmosphere.

13. I heard confessions in moving trucks. I heard confessions in crowded bunkers, trenches, and foxholes. Men were pressing upon penitent and confessor because there was no other shelter from exploding shells. On these occasions, I would remind them of the possibility of general absolution, but they insisted that if there was time, I had to listen to each one. And when I hesitatingly brought up the notion that the lack of privacy was reason enough to dispense from an integral confession, they just grinned paternally at me until I caught on. The comradeship of the trenches was comradeship all the way....even unto death. Buddies couldn't help hearing: but buddies didn't listen.

14. I gave general absolution a number of times. Too many people would show at the same time. Some would have to be sent back to man the guns. I'd give them general absolution, distribute Holy Communion; and, then, get them back into the fight. In July, 1953, the 32nd was alerted to join the battle for Pork Chop Hill. We moved from entrenched positions on the Division's extreme right to a marshalling area just South of Pork Chop. I heard confessions in this area for thirty-six hours straight.

15. And it was in the ministration of the Sacrament of Penance, that I had a most fearful experience. One day I was sitting on the bumper of my jeep, hearing a kneeling man's con-

fession, while a line of penitents were lined up behind the jeep, heads bowed in silent recall. Glancing up the hill momentarily, I saw my assistant, his head bowed close to another man's, while a line of men were strung out, waiting a chance to talk to him! What was going on? What terrible simulation was this? The man who was confessing to me must have sensed my terrible agitation. He finished hurriedly, and then explained to me that the men talking to my assistant had asked him to give them a quick review on the proper formula for confession, to polish up their language a bit, before they went to confession to me for real. Like I said, a GI will create his own atmosphere.

EX PARTE FIDELIUM

16. I reported in my presentation of the Sacrament of Penance how the GI's created a battlefield expedient to replace the traditional atmosphere for its confection. Mass, altar furnishings, and congregational bearing were something else again. The least deviation threw them.

17. I said only one Mass without a Sanctus bell, but I unleashed a storm of consternation throughout the Catholic community of the Regiment that did not abate until some two months later, after I had received at least fifty Sanctus bells. I forget who stepped on the original Sanctus bell. The very next day a replacement arrived from some motor pool workshop. The fullness of the liturgy had been restored. But the word was out. The boys bought the bells on the Ginza. I kept a few for

spares, and gave the rest to the Colomaban missionaries.

18. I carried a folding wooden altar table on the hood of the jeep. If the hill was too steep, the trenches too narrow, or the fire too intense, I wouldn't attempt to carry it into the positions. I knew that I could always find some 'C' ration boxes, ammo cans, or sand bags to serve as an altar table. My antependium was a blanket with a white cross centered on it. It was a necessary piece of equipment. It protected the altar linens from the dirty or wet surfaces of the improvised altars. I was quite content with it until I received a replacement from Tokyo. This antependium was of red silk, adapted for field use by a rubberized liner for the altar top. Lt Tom Blanchfield, who gave me the antependium, inclosed a note inviting me 'to give the blanket back to the horse'.

19. My congregations knelt. They persisted in kneeling, and not just at the Consecration. They knelt during the entire Mass. They knelt in the mud, on stones, and amid shell and cartridge casings. And they took up collections. I objected to this at first. One man summed up their sentiment: "It's a Catholic Mass, isn't it?" They used my helmet for the collection plate. Those paper nickels and dimes in MPC provided lots of kimchee for the little orphans in Seoul and Incheon.

20. Every day was Sunday for me. I put out the word to

the men to this effect because some of them were worried about not getting to Mass on Sundays. When the entire Regiment was on the line, even though all was quiet on the front, it would take me about fifteen days to make the Mass circuit of the Regiment. Men were killed between one Mass visit and the next. I worried about the long span of time between Masses. Cardinal O'Hara of Philadelphia, who handled all the battlefield reports of Catholic chaplains during World War II, gave me the answer. He saw a parallel between my coverage and that given by the circuit riding missionaries of American frontier days. Since every day was Sunday, I preached a sermon at every Mass. The sermons were doctrinal for the most part. The moral sermons had a battlefield slant on the theme of commutative justice. The men understood quite well the moral implications of unit morale, but they were fuzzy about the responsibility of responding to some commands, seemingly unjust, cruel, foolhardy, or militarily unwise. I made two pitches: (1) The General in the OP could see the entire battle; the rifleman on the parapet could see only a corner of it. (2) "Ours was to do and die."

#### MAJOR BATTLE

21. By the fifth day of the battle for Triangle Hill, the entire Seventh Division had been committed. We had been told to expect a bloody nose--we got a bloody head. Line company platoons were led by PFC'S. The cry for replacements went clear back to Inchon. Normally, I'd have Mass, confession, and Communion for replacements at Service Company. Now, the trucks,

loaded with men, were roaring down the MSR, non-stop from Division to the Kumhwa crossroads. How assignments were made to Companies, I don't know.

22. A truck load would dismount, a Sergeant would step forward: "This half of you men belong to me. Form on the right!" Another Sergeant would take the remainder. The dismounting took place in an artillery impact area. There was no assembly or briefing. The men were ordered to load their weapons, to form into files, and to begin the single column climb to the trenches a mile distant. Commands of the NCO's told the story: "Move out! Move out! Keep your eyes ahead there soldier!" (The path had yet to be cleared of its dead.)

23. Sgt Frank Murphy, the Service Company Replacement NCO, had called me at the Battalion aid station to give me the problem of ministering to replacements before they were committed to the battle. He told me the trucks bringing the replacements would be in small convoys, perhaps only ten trucks to a convoy. I decided to see how things looked on the MSR. With my assistant driving, I set out in my jeep to find a break. If no break materialized, I might be able to manage a general absolution at a crossroads.

24. Just North of Regiment, I got my break. The convoy had been halted along the MSR by some QM people who were issuing armored vests. I sought out the convoy commander, determined from him that I couldn't have any special time for a Mass, but

that he would cooperate in any way. We both knew that I couldn't delay the convoy. He made an announcement that I would hear confessions and give Communion, a truck at a time. I put on my stole, moved around to the front of the truck, and began to hear confessions. As soon as I gave a man absolution, I'd give him Communion immediately. I'd worked my way down to the fifth truck in the ten truck convoy when orders came to mount up. We had a little flap then. Some of the men thought they'd have no chance to receive the Sacraments. They were almost mutinous. They quieted down when assured I'd get to them.

25. I climbed into the body of the truck and continued my ministrations as we rolled along. As I finished with each truck, my jeep, following along behind, would pull up, the truck would slow down, I'd jump out, mount the jeep, catch up with another truck, and repeat the process until I'd covered the whole convoy. With some of the other convoys, I had it somewhat easier. I'd come upon them at a water point, or meal halt, and accomplish my ministrations with no strain.

#### EXTREME UNCTION

26. I administered Extreme Unction about two hundred times to men of my own, supporting, attached, and adjacent units. The average age of the recipients was twenty years. The death "that comes like a thief in the night" is the death that mankind generally knows. This is not the kind of a death a soldier meets. Night is the time of wakefulness on the battlefield. Death may come on silent feet. More frequently it screams into the trenches,

riding on a single shell or on the wings of a great barrage. The soldier goes to meet his death. He is the victim when he would be the killer.

27. Men often asked to be annointed on the eve of battle. They "wanted to be all cleaned up when they faced the Lord." They understood when I told them it couldn't be done. I invited them all to form actual intentions to receive the Sacrament when I held company Masses. Nor was there any question when a man formed this intention, reconciling himself without question to the imminent and all-pervading likelihood of death, that he was surrendering even an ounce of his will to live and fight.

28. On a bright sunshiny day in November, Sgt Eddie Le Blanc flagged down my jeep as I was passing by his patrol ranged just inside the barricade to await the coming of darkness before moving into no-man's land. Eddie expected to kill or be killed that night. He asked me to anoint him. I gave him the doctrine. He understood, but asked me to stand by that night until his patrol returned. He was ready to receive Extreme Unction, but he was dressed in his hunting gear: skin blackened with cork, bandoliers of ammo strung down his chest, rifle grenades and hand grenades around the waist, banana clips in his carbine. He grinned when he saw me looking him over. "Don't worry, Padre, I'll keep shooting as long as I'm breathing."

29. I would stand by at the barricade, a forward trench line,



an outpost, a rescue armored carrier to sweat out a patrol if there was only one major patrol on a given night. My obligation to the rest of the regiment made it imperative that I be near a telephone or radio. My commo system was unofficial, but legal.

30. Sgt Basco, a medic in the Third Battalion, formed a net, using all the Cajun boys in the regiment as my eyes, ears, and transportation along the entire front. If I had waited at medical company for the casualties to come in, many of the men whom I anointed shortly after they were hit, would have been dead or unconscious by the time I saw them. Basco and his Cajuns shepherded me out into no-man's-land with the support patrol or the litter bearers on Sacramental sorties night after night.

31. The Council of Trent refers to the Sacrament of Extreme Unction as "the consummation of the whole Christian life." The dying men whom I anointed faced up to the naturally sad prospect of knowing that it was now time for this Sacrament; but, they had faced up to the prospect that they would one day receive it, years before. The notion that the last moments before death is a time for truth, not for false assurance; a time to prepare, not a time for vain regrets, was as familiar as the "Our Father". Not so, however, to all the men who, watching them die; and, moved with the tenderest compassion in the world, that of a soldier for his dying comrade, tried to ease the pain

of their going.

32. The aid station was crowded with casualties. The 81 mortars of Dog Company had caught sustained and observed enemy mortar fire for five minutes. I could hear the man on the operating table calling my name, but I had difficulty making my way past the wounded lying on the floor to him. "Get Father Madden"! He was crying it out, over and over, piteously. The medics were pressed around the doctor, some cutting away the wounded man's clothing, others trying to find a sound place on the dismembered body to insert the plasma and blood tubes. I finally came up to the operating table, recognized the man and called his name. "Joe" The doctor looked up. "You'll have to talk louder, Chaplain. He's been partially deafened." I looked to see why Joe didn't recognize me, only to realize that he had been blinded too. The rest of his face was unmarked; in fact, it was the only part of his body that was whole. I called louder, "Joe". "Oh, Father, thank God, you're here. I think I'm dying. Am I?" A medic sergeant, choking back the tears, cut in: "Take it easy, soldier, you're going to be all right." Joe shook with impatience, "No, no, Father, you tell me. Let the Father tell me." I didn't need to ask the Doctor. "Joe, I'm sorry, but you are dying." "OK. I want to go to confession." And he started right in. He had no way of knowing that he was shouting his confession. Everyone in the aid station heard. I was the only one who listened. I

couldn't annoint him on all the senses. He received Viaticum, and then began to say the Hail Mary. He died before he finished. I had the impression that he was giving the salutation to someone. The "Angelic Salutation" will always be for me "A GI Salutation" too.

#### A NOTE ON THE LANGUAGE OF THIS PAPER

I have chosen to present this paper in the language of the troops it commemorates. The colloquialisms of the soldiers who people these pages was the language of my wartime parish. The colloquialisms in the narrative section of the paper belong there also.

The limited audience (referred to in paragraph 2), to whom this paper is addressed, will notice that the outdated military terminology belongs to the day of the rectangular Division.

## Abstract

of

Administration of Sacraments in Combat

Sacraments have a primary purpose in history. Here they are specifically considered in combat. They are discussed in their religious sequence.

Baptism and the Eucharist are administered in the usual way. Baptism is also given to the dying. Penance needed more adaptation to the battlefield than other Sacraments.

Battlefield necessities prompted worshipping men many times to aid the priest with physical means to carry out the Sacraments. A total battle unit, a Division, was administered the Sacraments as the priest rode truck after truck moving up to the front.

The Sacrament of Extreme Unction fulfilled its proper place at the aid station and near the front.